

19 Language Socialization and Verbal Improvisation

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Introduction

In this chapter, we suggest that verbal improvisation is a human universal even though its manifestation is subject to contextual variation and conventionalization. Communities and social units of various kinds and size (e.g. family, peer group, school, workplace) vary in how they recognize, encourage, and tolerate verbal improvisation. On the basis of the existing evidence, we hypothesize that (1) children and other novices must acquire the ability to discern when and to what extent they may vary their performance of any culturally recognizable activity and, more generally, be creative in the way they carry out a task; (2) given that much of human action is conceived, executed, and interpreted by others as within culturally established paths, novices' creativity does not imply a general expectation for completely novel acts: in other words, verbal improvisation – like musical improvisation – is also subject to cultural constraints; and (3) despite degrees and types of variation in the execution of tasks allowed or prescribed in different communities, cross-cultural similarities in patterns of verbal improvisation and in their evaluation are possible and not uncommon.

Improvisation is common in certain types of music and theater as well as in certain genres of oral poetry, from the ancient Homeric epics as reconstructed by Milman Parry and his student Albert Lord to contemporary 'free style' hip hop – Ruth Finnegan's (1977: 18) term 'composition-in-performance' captures an important quality of these genres. The ability to improvise is also necessary in children's linguistic play and other creative activities that have been studied by researchers in a variety of fields. Even though the importance of improvisation has been recognized in Bourdieu's influential notion of habitus (1977: 79) and in

Giddens' (1979: 18) interpretation of Chomsky's notion of 'rule-governed creativity,' there has been little use of the notion of improvisation in the study of children's language use or language acquisition. In this chapter, we identify a number of activities in which children are exposed to or engage in verbal improvisation. We start with repetition as the basis of variation and continue with analysis of various forms of creative behavior, including verbal play and joking. We also stress the ubiquity of improvisation as an art form that emerges out of everyday interaction. Verbal improvisation is also constantly evaluated, like all human creative activities. A distinction must be made between situations and genres where improvisation is tolerated or even encouraged and those in which it is negatively sanctioned. Adult prompting and metapragmatic instructions (e.g. 'say it this way!') can thus be seen as attempts to control and regulate the type and degree of verbal improvisation that children and novices are allowed.

We start our discussion by looking at variation as a basic type of creative behavior that includes improvised elements. We then continue with 'performed improvisation'; that is, situations in which speakers are engaged in exhibiting their spontaneous verbal creativity (e.g. in joking, pretend play). Finally, we examine how improvisation is tolerated, encouraged, or negatively sanctioned. The attention to improvisation as behavior that calls for a practical, aesthetic, and ethical evaluation informs the definition of socialization into improvisation provided at the end of the chapter.

Repetition versus Variation

Although language socialization studies often stress children's role in their own socialization (echoing Jean Piaget's view of children as agents in their understanding of their world), there has been a tendency in the discipline to focus on normative behavior and, more specifically, on the ways in which children are taught to conform to expected social norms in terms of speaking, acting, and feeling (but see Kulick and Schieffelin 2004 for an argument in favor of the need for 'bad subjects'). This tendency is well-represented by the focus on routines, a recurrent theme of language socialization studies, which suggests that not only members but researchers as well have generally assumed that repetition is a key strategy for getting novices to acquire a given skill, for example how to greet, how to make a request, or how to pray (see Moore, this volume). But the empirical study of routines has also revealed variation, in at least two senses of the term: (1) variation as an end result – that is, how much variability the child ends up mastering – and (2) variation in performance – that is, how closely a child is able or willing to follow a given model provided by peers or adults.

Variation as an end result

The study of children's participation in routines has shown that over time rigid or fixed structures may give way to looser ones in which 'the child is [...] allowed

to take on roles other than the one originally assigned to him or her' (Peters and Boggs 1986: 91). In other words, it can be shown that the social system in place for scaffolding children's meaningful actions expects conformity to a given model or pattern while leaving room for some variation. In fact, when we look at children's own renditions of adult ritual performances, we may find that they expand significantly on the range of linguistic features found in the adult versions. This is carefully documented in Jennifer Reynolds' research in the Kaqchikel Maya town of San Antonio Aguas Calientes, Guatemala, where she recorded children re-enacting at home the ritual performance of *El Desafío* ('the Challenge') (between Christians and Moors) that is yearly performed in public by the adult Catholic parishioners in the town. She shows that, in playing the traditional roles of *Rey Moro* (Moor King) and *Rey Cristiano* (Christian King), the children, differently from the adults, hybridize the speech genre and register of the public performance in order to play out moral characters and stances that make sense to them (Reynolds in press).

These observations on the relationship between variation and improvisation lead us to a distinction between two possible meanings of the term 'improvisation' as applied to human development and socialization: improvisation as flexibility and improvisation as performance.

Improvisation as Flexibility in Execution of Tasks

The first and broader meaning of improvisation is flexibility in the ways of carrying out a task. This is made explicit by some authors. For example, in her work on apprenticeship, Rogoff (1990: 8–9) recognized that problem solving involves 'flexible improvisation towards goals as diverse as planning a meal, writing an essay, convincing or entertaining others, exploring the properties of an idea or unfamiliar terrain or objects, or remembering or inferring the location of one's keys.' In this first sense, improvisation is 'one hallmark of expertise' (Pressing 1998: 50) and is expected to be a feature of all those situations in which participants must select among various aspects of individual or collective competence to solve novel problems. As pointed out by students of everyday interaction (e.g. Goffman 1967; Schegloff 2007), one of the problems that all people are called to solve countless times during any one day is the assessment of the situation at hand in order to decide one course of action among the many possible ones. In order to face this kind of daily challenge, memory and imitation alone are not sufficient and therefore children (and other novices) around the globe must be allowed – probably more often than we have been able to document – to show initiative and inventiveness at the right time and place. The search for patterns in children's actions – typically interpreted as the reproduction of adult ways of doing (e.g. speaking, gesturing, posturing, grasping, walking, using tools) – has often obscured the ways in which children are called upon to introduce variations and innovations in daily routines. Sawyer's (1996) proposal for a continuum from ritualized to improvisational performance is a way of accounting for the ongoing tension

between predictability and innovation that characterizes children's and, more generally, novices' meaningful actions (see also Paugh, this volume; Sawyer 2003).

Among social theorists, Pierre Bourdieu is noted for explicitly relying on the notion of improvisation as a key aspect of what he called the 'practical logic' of social life. As made clear by his adoption of the medieval notion of 'habitus,' for Bourdieu the kind of improvisation that social agents engage in is both 'regulated' and the product of 'intentionless invention' (1977: 79). This means that what appears 'natural' in someone's actions may in fact turn out to be the product of a long, implicit, and partly forgotten apprenticeship, as when a musician's ability to improvise is interpreted as 'pure inspiration.' Jean-François Dortier (2002) eloquently captured this aspect of the musician's habitus in the following passage (Dortier 2002: 5, translated by A. D.):

The *habitus* is in the first place the product of an apprenticeship that has become unconscious and is understood therefore as a seemingly natural way of freely performing in a given context. In fact, musicians can freely improvise at the piano only after having spent a long time practicing their scales, acquiring the rules of composition and harmony. It is only after having interiorized musical codes and constraints (the '*structured structures*') that a pianist can then compose, create, invent, and transmit her music (the '*structuring structures*'). Authors, composers, artists live, then, their creations as if they were due to a freedom to create, to pure inspiration, because they are no longer aware of the codes and the styles that they have deeply internalized. This is the case for music as well as for language, writing, and, in general, for thinking. We believe them all to be free and disembodied, whereas they are the product of deeply routed constraints and structures.

This conceptualization of how creativity is made possible by routinization recognizes what child language studies have long argued for; namely, the crucial role of repetition in development and apprenticeship. It also recognizes the fact that creativity is to be found in most task accomplishment, even though the degree of freedom of execution varies across situations and speech genres (see below). To better understand this variation, we examine verbal improvisation as performance.

Play and Other Creative Behaviors

We have evidence that there is variation across societies and contexts in the extent to which children are expected to closely follow the model offered to them by experts. In some activities, children are required to repeat *exactly* what the adult or local expert is modeling for them. This is often the case in those school contexts where rote learning is the dominant teaching paradigm. For example, in Maroua, Northern Cameroon, both the Qur'anic and the public schools follow a pattern that Leslie Moore called 'guided repetition,' a way of teaching that 'involves modeling by an expert and imitation by a novice, followed by rehearsal and performance by the novice' (Moore 2006: 110; this volume). In some other types of

activities, it has been shown that children are allowed more room for creative contributions. This is particularly the case in play activities, which may require and thus foster improvisational skills. For example, in Thailand, as documented by Kathryn Howard, children engage in humorous play with an aesthetic that 'requires being able to capitalize on fleeting opportunities, by utilizing complex contextual and pragmatic knowledge about the cultural frameworks and expectations that are in play in a particular interaction' (2009: 340). Howard explicitly mentions improvisation, drawing a parallel with jazz performance (see also Howard, this volume).

Even though the term 'improvisation' was not used in the study of language development before Keith Sawyer's study of children's pretend play (1993, 1997), instances of children spontaneously improvising can be found in the early literature on children's discourse. It was in particular the study of child-child as opposed to adult-child communication that showed that children interacting among themselves seem to *naturally* engage in creative behavior that we could now recast as verbal improvisation. Thus, Elinor [Ochs] Keenan (1974) showed that her twins David and Toby at two years and nine months, in addition to engaging in long sequences of conversational exchanges that were referentially interpretable, also exchanged long sequences of 'sound play' that were cooperative and (sound-wise) coherent.

In reporting that exchanges of this sort are common in her data, [Ochs] Keenan also noted that sound play sequences can start in response to utterances that have a clear referential meaning. In other words, her recorded examples show that for her children it was 'often acceptable to reply to a comment, command, question or song with an utterance which attends only to the form of that talk' (Keenan 1974: 176):

Example 19.1a

- *wake up* / *wake up* /
- [he:kʌt] (laughing)
- [he:kʌt]
- [be:kʌp]
- [bre:kʌt] [bre:kʌp]
- *wake up* [wi:kʌp] (laughing) [wi:kʌp]

Example 19.1b

- *black sheep* (4 sec) /
- *black* / [bakji] (?)
- [badijotj] (2 sec)
- [badzots]
- [batji] [batjotj]

As Keenan points out, this kind of non-sense response and its uptake over several more turns of sound play would not normally be acceptable among adults (see also Keenan 1974: 176n). This comparison between children's and adults'

discourse highlights another important factor in the study of socialization into improvisation; namely, that although children seem naturally prone to certain forms of verbal improvisation and engage in it when left to their own devices, adults may not be as prone to indulge in it. More importantly, adults and older siblings hold and use the right to approve, disapprove, or regulate various kinds of verbal creativity in a number of ways.

When we expand the population to include school-aged children all the way up to teenagers, we find that children's playful communication has been the subject of a considerable number of studies, which have shown that peer-group interactions are full of verbal improvisation. An important contribution in this area is Labov's (1972) discussion of 'ritual insults,' a type of highly creative verbal dueling common in black communities and referred to at the time by such terms as 'sounding, signifying, woofing, cutting' (see also Abrahams 1962; Kochman 1970; Mitchell-Kernan 1972; Smitherman 1977, 2007; Spears 2007). Labov and his research team documented that the group they studied ('the Jets') engaged in sequences of insults full of semantic shifts and other rhetorical devices. When subjected to formal analysis, this type of verbal competition revealed complex inferential processes at work in quickly improvised lines. Similar joking, playful rhyming, and sound symbolism have been described in a number of contexts including freestyle rap battles among hip hop artists (Alim 2006; Alim, Lee, and Mason 2010; Morgan 2009) and second language classrooms (Cetaike and Aronsson 2004, 2005; Rampton 1999). The linguistic innovations found in contemporary hip hop lyrics have also been shown to be a resource for the acquisition of a wide range of literacy skills (Alim 2004, 2007; Smitherman 2007). These and other sources suggest that, although improvisation and play tend to be equated in the popular literature (e.g. Nachmanovitch 1990), improvisation is by no means always 'playful.' It is possible to conceive and practice improvisation as a serious activity or as 'serious play' (Turner 1982). This is the case, for example, in most musical traditions, including jazz and other genres where the ability to improvise is seen as the result of strenuous and protracted practice and training (see Berliner 1994).

Verbal improvisation as performed creative behavior

There is another sense of improvisation that includes and at the same time goes beyond flexibility of task execution or variation in routine: scripted activities. In this other sense of the term, improvisation is no longer just a means to an end (e.g. for problem solving) but an end in itself. This second kind of improvisation can emerge spontaneously in any context but it is typically found in activities in which participants are expected to act in novel ways, displaying through their actions their own understanding of what is or should be going on. Improvisational theater and jazz have been shown to be such activities (Sawyer 2001, 2003). This interpretation of improvisation places it within the domain of performance, an important focus of interest for linguistic anthropologists. In particular, this second type of improvisation shares a key feature of Richard Bauman's conceptualization

of verbal art as performance; namely, the performers' assumption of responsibility to an audience for the display of their competence (Bauman 1975: 168–9; see also Hymes 1975). As pointed out by Harris Berger and Giovanna del Negro (2002), this type of commitment to an audience is a reflexive type of mutual understanding and thus a key element in the construction of a complex type of intersubjectivity (Husserl 1960): performers act knowing that the audience knows that they (the performers) know that they are being evaluated not only for what they do but also for the way they do it, as well as, in some cases, for the fact that they are doing it at all (as made explicit in comments such as 'it was courageous of you to give such a speech!'). If we accept the idea that evaluation is a key component of agency (e.g. Duranti 2004; Taylor 1985), we can recognize the domain of performance in the sense proposed by Bauman as a reflexive kind of agency; namely, the acting in the world of agents who know they are being agentive.

Verbal improvisation: Joking Joking is an everyday activity that fits the definition of verbal performance as reflexive agency. Spontaneous jokes are also pivotal moments in an interaction when the mood and content shift, unexpectedly pulling bystanders into the jokes or transforming them into an evaluating audience (Sherzer 2002: 44). In several respects, jokes in conversational interaction have properties that are similar to improvised music. Without being professional performers, those who engage in these verbal exchanges are able to rapidly and smoothly construct speech actions that build on what has just been said (or done) while adding a new point of view that evokes or imposes a different stance with respect to what has just happened. Spontaneous jokes provide an arena for displaying fast thinking and a person's sense of humor while also testing out recipients' or bystanders' moral stance with respect to a given issue or problem. To illustrate this point, we will draw from Black's research project in Durban, South Africa, where he followed a gospel choir comprised of isiZulu-speaking individuals living with HIV/AIDS. Black (2010) found that, among choir members, in the context of extreme societal stigmatization of the disease, joking about HIV was not unusual (see also Black forthcoming). It could, in fact, be interpreted in two ways: (1) a transformation of a broader community-wide pattern of stigmatized humor about HIV and (2) part of a shared attitude that enabled them to carry on maintaining semblance of a normal life. Typically, choir members' joking was highly improvisational and often constituted a form of support and their way of facing HIV.

Example 19.2 captures an interaction in isiZulu that occurred before the start of a choir rehearsal, when group members and the researcher were cleaning up the garage in which the choir rehearsed, moving things around to make space and setting up the keyboard, bass, and drum set (see also Black 2010: 275–7). To understand what is going on among the participants, it is important to remember that tuberculosis infection (TB) is often correlated with HIV in South Africa, a fact that has led many South Africans to conceptualize the two diseases as inexorably linked.

Example 19.2: 05–11–2008 Tape 1: 11min 10sec

Bongiwe (B), Ndumiso (N), and other participants including Dumisile and the researcher.

- 1 B: ((sweeping)) *sima lapha vele?* (('it' refers to a small bench)
'is it [the bench] supposed to be here?'
- 2 N: *yah sima lapha. noma uzosidonsa uhambe naso.*
'Yeah, it's supposed to be here. or you'll drag it and go (home)
with it.'
- 3 B: *hhayibo. ngiyaphuquza mina.*
'Hey (no). Me, I am making dust.'
- 4 N: *sizoba ne TB*
'We will get TB'
- 5 B: *kade ngingashaneli benginiphathisa ngethi- eh. nge TB.*
'I wasn't sweeping I was just infecting you all with- eh. with TB.'
- 6 N: *mmm* ((high-pitched start, drops down))

The excerpt began with Bongiwe sweeping and asking about where to position a small bench upon which choir members sometimes sat (line 1). In line 2, Ndumiso responded 'yeah,' and then established a play frame (Bateson 1955) with his exaggerated claim that if Bongiwe did not leave the bench where it was she would 'drag it and go home with it' (line 2). Recognizing this play frame, Bongiwe then explained that she was 'making dust' – the opposite of what one should do when sweeping (line 3). Ndumiso next expanded on Bongiwe's statement, perhaps perceiving an implicit indexical entailing (Silverstein 1976) of TB through the verb meaning 'making dust.' Ndumiso said outright, 'we will get TB' (line 4). After this, Bongiwe made the link between making dust and TB explicit, saying that she 'wasn't sweeping' but instead was infecting nearby individuals with TB (line 5). The instance of joking concludes with Ndumiso's 'mmm' (line 6), which we take to be a minimal and yet effective evaluation.

In Example 19.2, each next move built off of the indexical entailments of the previous moves, with the shared presupposition that both Bongiwe and Ndumiso are HIV-positive; the joking was 'emergent,' in the sense that each conversational turn developed from the previous turn and the course of the joking could not have been predicted prior to its conclusion (Mead 1932; Sawyer 1997: 41).

The Ubiquity of Improvisation

Both improvisation as flexibility in the execution of tasks and improvisation as performed creative behavior are ubiquitous dimensions of human life. They remain, however, little recognized or theorized in the study of human development¹ and language socialization. Sawyer is an unusual scholar in having devoted a number of publications to exploring the similarities between children's conver-

sations and improvisational genres such as jazz and improvisational theater. On the basis of his observations of pretend play in a preschool classroom with 24 children between the ages of three and five, Sawyer (1997) proposed a model that draws from a number of authors but ends up converging on three main concepts: the emergent nature of children's pretend play, the importance of the frame established by previous interactions, and the role of the indexical properties of speech, whereby each contribution (e.g. turn) both presupposes what has just been said and entails possible future directions.

A good example of the tension between making one's contribution relevant to what was just said and proposing something new is provided by the following interaction from a 1981 film of Samoan children engaged in pretend play on the beach, where the sand becomes cement and rocks and little sticks are transformed into trucks, boats, or firewood.²

Example 19.3: 'Boys on the beach' – from *Sound Super 8 Film*³

Participants: Amato (A) , Iaone (I), Manuele (Ma), and Si'i (S).

- 4 A: *mai kaloge!*
'bring (a) gallon (of cement)!'
5 (*e lo'o ma 'au / / ? le uila*)
'there it is with me/my . . . the toilet'
- 6 S: *kākou o sa kae (gi) ele (i le) sami!*
'let's go to wash in the sea!'
- 7 A: *'uma fai la'u pū faleuila.*
'I finished making my toilet hole.'
8 *'uma.*
'finished.'
9 *'uma fai la'u faleui / / la*
'finished doing my restroom'
- 10 I: *fai VA'A! ((LG)) hehe-he//he!*
'make BOATS!' ((laughing)) 'hehe!'
- 11 A: *e eli pū::!*
' . . . to dig a hole!'
- 12 Ma: *fai VA'A!*
'make BOATS!'
- 13 I: *fā'a VA'A! alu. kope.*
'make BOATS! Go. quick.'
14 *e o 'uma (le) fa (i/le) va'a.*
'to go finish (the) making (of) boats.'
- 15 S: *//sole!*
brother!
- 16 A: *'o le va'a A :: FI. : !*
'An ELECTRIC boat!'

- 17 // *e ola le va`a afi.*
'the electric boat works.'
- 18 I: (*uma*) *le va`a afi.*
'the electric boat (is finished).'
- 19 *alu. alu. alu. //((softer)) alu-alu-alu-alu.*
'go. go. go. go-go-go-go.'

While seven-year-old Ameto is still working at making his own pretend toilet, six-year-old Si'i proposes to go to wash in the sea, but the suggestion is ignored by the rest of the group. Only after Ameto has repeatedly announced (lines 7–9) that he has finished making the toilet does the older boy, Ioane (nine years), propose a new task, building a boat (*fai va`a*) (line 12). The proposal is accepted by four-year-old Manuele (line 12), who, however, continues to dig into the sand. Ioane immediately expands his own proposal into a more complex directive that includes the same verb (*uma* ('finish')) previously used by Ameto (line 14). The latter accepts and further expands Ioane's proposal, making the boat 'electric' (*va`a afi*); that is, with a motor.

At the end of the excerpt, the pretend play turns into a quickly uttered series of individual proposals with the same rhythm and sing-song prosody. The play frame (Bateson 1955) has acquired recognizable features of 'verbal performance' – in the sense described by Bauman (1975) – as made evident by the frequent use of parallelism in the form of complete or partial repetition of the immediately preceding utterance, within or across turns. This type of performance is related to but different from the notion of performance used by Goffman (1959) to describe everyday interaction as a stage where individuals assume particular roles and work at managing the impression they give about themselves as moral characters. In the exchange among the Samoan children, one of the goals of each contribution is to keep the exchange going, or 'make it last,' as suggested by Elinor [Ochs] Keenan's (1983) study of the spontaneous verbal play of her twins. The practical, action-oriented aspect of the interaction among the Samoan boys is – phenomenologically speaking – repeatedly 'suspended' as participants become an audience and verbal contributions are explicitly evaluated not only by whether or not there is an uptake of a given proposal – as we saw, Si'i's proposal of going to wash in the sea (line 6) is ignored all the others – but also by a standard feedback signal such as laughter, which suggests that each proposal is being judged not so much on the basis of whether it will be carried out but in terms of whether it is funny, clever, or original as well as in terms of its contribution to keeping the verbal exchange going as a goal in itself.

Example 19.4 is a continuation of the previous interaction:

Example 19.4: 'Boys on the beach'

- 20 S: *fai MAUGA! fai MAUGA!*
'make HILLS! make HILLS!'

- 21 A: *fai le FU.:(G)'A :. fai FU'A!*
 'make a FLAG. make FLAGS!'
 22 (1.0)
 23 I: *i. fai fu'a=*
 'yeah. make flags'
 24 Ma: *=fai KA'AVALE!*
 'make cars!'
 25 A: *fai fu'a. `uma fu'a.*
 'make flags. finish flags.'
 26 S: *EAI-FAI!*
 do (it) do (it)!
 27 Ma: *(sa / / u / fa / / i) KA'AVALE!*
 '(comes/do) (the) cars'
 28 ((unclear)) (? ?)
 29 A: *fai le (alaisa. //alaisa. alaisa.)*
 'make the (rice // rice. rice.)'
 [...]

This extended exchange shows that children not only improvise the content of their verbal exchanges by entering and sustaining the frame of 'pretend play,' 'make believe,' or 'role-play' (see Bretherton 1984), but also cleverly produce verbal contributions that are matched against an in-progress collectively evoked and sustained aesthetic, as defined, among other things, by such nonreferential features as the length, volume, rhythm, and prosody of their contiguous utterances and turns.

Improvisation as Patterned Behavior

From previous studies of improvisation in music and other art forms, we learn that typically improvisation does not mean random behavior – as in doing something that is out of the ordinary, completely unpredictable, or unexplainable. Rather, it consists of the production of meaningful actions that follow patterns or principles – what Pressing (1984) calls 'the referent' – that are both sufficiently specific to provide guidelines and constraints on what to do (and what to expect) and sufficiently generic to allow for individual and collective creativity (Berliner 1997). From the point of view of socialization, the study of improvisational genres in music has shown that performers undergo a long and arduous period of training in which repetition, daily routines, and imitation play a major role. This is true of the most diverse genres, from Indian classical music (Neuman 1990) to jazz (Berliner 1994).

Improvisation always implies a combination of conformity and innovation and the extent to which and the areas in which an individual or group is allowed to do something in a novel way vary from one context to another within and across communities. In many improvised musical genres, for example, there is freedom 'only within a rigorous and tightly knit system of structural principles' (Nettl and Riddle 1998: 391). For these reasons, it is not innovation *per se* that defines improvisation but the combination of recognizable variation (from an expected pattern), culture-specific acceptable degree of innovation, and its evaluation (Barontini and Nardini 2009; Duranti and Burrell 2004; Martin 2002). In genres that include multiple performers improvising simultaneously, there are also conventions that shape how performers attend to and respond to others' improvisational contributions (Berger 1999; Black 2008; Duranti 2009; Monson 1996; Pagliai 2010; Sawyer 2001; Tiezzi 2009).

The Evaluation and Sanctioning of Improvisation

In some cases the evaluation of improvisation will be explicit, as when it is the object of verbal comments or gestures, including nodding, laughter, or applauding; in other cases it will be implicit, as when children are allowed to do something in their own way instead of being corrected and forced to follow the pattern that is expected in the given situation. The tension between conformity to expectations and negotiation of the rules on the ground is captured by Marcyliena Morgan in her study of freestyle at 'Project Blowed' in Los Angeles (2009: 96–7):

While the rules of freestyle are well defined, the grounds for battle are not explicitly stated. Rather, they have been established through long-term socialization in hiphop skill development and assessment. The Project Blowed freestyle of rapid-fire, extemporaneous, articulate delivery is known throughout LA's underground. Members usually follow each other without missing a beat. Their style is the modification and reworking of the American English sound and word system – with Jamaican Creole and Mexican and Chicano Spanish thrown in for added measure. The Project Blowed style stands out in that it is a linguistic exercise in the juxtaposition of meaningful and meaningless sounds, words, and grammatical structures that create fissures that erupt into new meanings.

These playful linguistic innovations documented by Morgan are also used to deliver social and political messages (2009: 97). More generally, she shows that in performing freestyle there are both aesthetic and ethical standards. The latter are expressed in sayings such as 'those who rhyme – represent; those who lack game – complain' (Morgan 2009: 101), which must be understood as a warning against MCs who focus too much on 'dissing' or shaming an opponent. In these contexts, the aesthetic canons – for example, rhyiming, keeping the rhythm, and being funny in ways that keep the audience engaged – are also instrumental to a type of

problem-solving that has existential as well as political and moral meanings. This is made evident by Alim, Lee, and Mason (2010), who show that hip hop verbal competition can function as a way of working out speakers' own racial, ethnic, and gender identities.

Degree of tolerance toward improvisation

The degree to which improvisation is encouraged versus discouraged in a given context or activity contributes to an analytical distinction between the notion of verbal art as performance and the notion of verbal improvisation. The two do not necessarily imply one another. It is possible to be in the domain of performance in the sense defined above while not being in the domain of improvisation (Sawyer 1995). A good example for clarifying this distinction is found in Paul Kroskrity's (1993, 1998) study of verbal performance among the Arizona Tewa. Kroskrity illustrates a contrast between two speech genres that we could recast as a difference between a speech genre in which improvisation is devalued and a (related) speech genre in which improvisation is tolerated and even expected. In the kiva, the center of ritual life for the Tewa and several other Native American groups in the southwest of the United States, exact reproduction of the ancestral language is demanded: 'In the kiva, ritual performers rely on fixed prayer and song texts, and innovation is neither desired nor tolerated. Ritual performance should replicate past conventions; if such repetition is impossible, the ritual should not be performed at all' (Kroskrity 2000: 336). Indeed, Frank Hamilton Cushing (1957–1900), a pioneer anthropologist practicing participant-observation among the neighboring Zuni, was severely hit with a large wooden pole for uttering a Spanish word in a kiva and thus violating the purist language ideology of the community (2000: 337). As Kroskrity explains, though, other closely related genres, most notably storytelling, share only some of the features of kiva speech 'regimentation' (2009: 47–8), a fact recognized by some Tewa speakers themselves: 'Though [Tewa storytellers] recognize the need for authority-conferring connections, they know their stories are not the fixed-text prayers of [kiva] ritual performance' (2009: 48). In particular, stories are subject to the aesthetics of 'carrying it here'; that is, the need to adapt them to the unique needs and interests of the audience (Kroskrity, personal communication). The degree of similarity between the two genres, along with a performer's leeway in reproducing authoritative texts, is a site of recent ideological contestation (2009: 51). From this and other examples provided by Kroskrity, we conclude that, even though kiva speech is an instance of speech in the domain of performance, in it improvisation is explicitly devalued.

From the point of view of socialization, it is important to document in what activities and to what extent children of various ages and novices (of varying levels) are allowed to improvise. One genre that shows a great deal of variation in this respect is prayer. At one end of the continuum we find 'guided repetition,' for example from the Qur'an (Moore 2006, this volume) or other religious texts. At the other end of the continuum, we find both tolerance and encouragement of improvisation to such an extent that the very boundaries of the genre and even

the nature of the activity risk being violated. Example 19.5 is taken from a study of socialization into prayer in the United States (Capps and Ochs 2002).⁴ Five-and-a-half-year-old Laurie volunteers to say grace. Her mother lets her do it after making sure that the condition of having everyone sitting at the table is satisfied.

Example 19.5: Jessup Dinner 1

Participants: Jimmy (4;4), Laurie (5;7), Annie (7;10), Roger (10;8), and mother.

Laurie: I wanna pray ((clasps her hands)) – Jesus?

Mother: ((to Roger)) () ((adjusting Laurie’s chair))

Roger: ((mumbled, to Mom)) ()=

Laurie: =Jesus?

Mother: Wait a minute Laurie ((irritated, throwing arms up in semi-despair)) I’m not sitting down ((Mother sits))

Laurie: ‘kay – Jesus? – plea:se – um – help us to love and .hh um
– Thank you for letting it be a n:ice day and for taking a fun
nap? .hh – a:nd – for (letting) Mommy go bye and I’m glad
that I cwied to[day? cuz I [like cwying .hh and

Annie: [((snicker))

Roger: [((snicker))

Laurie: I’m glad (that anything/everything) happened today in Jesus
name ((clasps hands)) A:-MEN!

Roger: [amen ((clapping lightly))

Mother: [amen

Jimmy: [A: MEN
(1.0) ((Laurie starts licking fork))

Jimmy: amen bay? be! ((baby))

Mother: hohoho
((general laughter – Mom, then Roger and Annie; Mom gets up))

Jimmy: [amen

Annie: [amen honey bunch? ((with Southern accent))
(1.0)

Annie: [amen dahling? ((with glamor accent))

Jimmy: [amen!

Jimmy: A: MEN bay?be.
((Mom begins bringing cups and milk container to table and
begins pouring))

As pointed out by Capps and Ochs (2002: 47), despite the positive framing of the events (‘I’m glad’), ‘the recounted events themselves (‘Mommy go bye,’ ‘I cwied today’) appear to clash with these sentiments. [...] Whereas Laurie’s earlier account of pleasant events fits well with the design features of thanksgiving, the evolving problem-centered narrative is dramatically discrepant.’

From the point of view of improvisation, this exchange provides us with a rich example of both creativity and tolerance. The responses by Laurie's siblings display some of the verbal features we previously noticed among the Samoan children playing on the beach and the South African friends joking about their own very serious medical condition. In Example 19.5, the inappropriate and, to the children, humorous verbal additions to the closing 'amen' shift the frame, turning the activity of praying into a playful performance of verbal dexterity. As documented by Capps and Ochs, the breaking of the prayer frame is also found in institutional contexts, for example in the Sunday school. But in that context the teacher tries to bring the children back into assuming the expected behavior. This study shows that children are socialized into being sensitive to the contexts in which playful improvisation is allowed.

Adults and experts may also try to control in advance the amount of freedom of execution that children and novices can have. This is particularly the case when adults are afraid that a younger person acting as messenger might not be able to convey the right message or the appropriate attitude, thereby putting at risk the relationship with the sender or the principal (Goffman 1981). An example of this kind of metapragmatic control is found in the following exchange where two Samoan *matai* ('titled people'), SA and F, order a young man, M, to go and ask the senior orator Iuli for some kava roots (*ava*) to be used to prepare the ceremonial drink with the same name.

Example 19.6: 'Some kava for the chiefs'; Western Samoa, May 1981

- 1 F: *sau!*
'come!'
2 (5.0)
- 3 SA: *alu fai iā Iuli po 'o iai sogā 'ava.*
'go tell Iuli if he has any kava.'
4 (1.8)
- 5 F: *alu fai iā Iuli e-*
'to tell Iuli to-'
6 (0.3)
- 7 SA: *fā'amolemole pe:-*
'please if-'
8 (0.4)
- 9 F: *iai sogā 'ava e 'aumai 'o-*
'(he) has kava to bring - '
10 (2.0)
- 11 *'o lea kāk-*
'now that we-'
12 *e- e pokopoko lo kākou pikogū'u!*
'(that) our subvillage is assembling'
13 (5.0)

- 14 F: (o) le (a) maua fo'i fa'apea e::- e: lava mai.
'(we) heard also that (he) said (he) would come.'
- 15 (1.0)
- 16 F: 'a e `aumai muamua se `ava se`i-
'but to give (us) first some kava so that-'
- 17 ?: (?)
- 18 F: se`i sāugiugi ai.
'so that it can be prepared.'
- 19 (2.2)
- 20 SA: fai iai fa'amolemole `ua lee ai so makou `ava
'say to him "please we have no kava"'
- 21 pe iai sogā `ava e.;
'if he's got kava, okay?'
- 22 (0.2)
- 23 M: ia'.
'okay.'

The collaborative reformulation of what should be said to Iuli shows that both SA and F are concerned with the younger man's ability to show respect and explain the reason for the request. The embedded request in lines 3 and 5 is enriched by SA in line 7 with the addition of the directly quoted term 'please' (*fa'amolemole*) that M should use, which is then, in turn, followed by another embedded request initiated by SA and completed by F as an indirect if- clause (*pe-*) in the third person: 'if- if he has some kava' (lines 7 and 9). F continues by providing M with the lines that can be used to explain to Iuli the reason for the request; namely, that the representatives of the (i.e. Iuli's) subvillage are (already) gathered (line 12) and that they have heard that he had planned to attend (line 14). In anticipation of the response that Iuli might be bringing the kava himself, M is provided with the additional motivating factor for why he has been sent; namely, that the kava roots are needed as soon as possible so that the kava drink can be prepared in time for the gathering (line 18). At this point, chief SA wraps it up with a final reformulation of the request that, if properly delivered, should make Iuli feel sorry for the other chiefs, who do not have any kava of their own. With his 'okay' (*ia'*), M agrees to carry out the task and the exchange comes to completion.

It is the inherently improvised quality of everyday life that worries the two adult speakers in Example 19.6. This exchange shows that, even in a society where children, teenagers, and young adults are routinely asked to perform tasks on behalf of older and more experienced people, there is concern not only with making the request clear but also with its motivation and the manner in which it is delivered. In other words, in sending young M to ask Iuli to provide kava roots for the meeting, the Samoan matai F and SA want to do everything they can to

control the practical, aesthetic, and moral sense of the request. M must achieve (1) the practical goal of getting the kava roots from Iuli immediately so that he can bring them back before Iuli arrives, (2) the aesthetic goal of asking with a language that displays respect, and (3) the moral goal of making a request that is perceived as just and reasonable and not as an imposition.

Conclusions

In this chapter we have reviewed existing literature in the study of child language, language socialization, and improvisational art genres such as jazz and freestyle in hip hop to provide a general framework for socialization into verbal improvisation and, in turn, for the role of improvisation in socializing children to interact with others in ways that are not only culturally appropriate but also valuable. We know from language acquisition studies that children start out being exposed to and engaging in a high dose of verbal repetition. This repetition, however, also provides the basis of verbal variation, including the variation found in verbal play. As reflected in Bourdieu's use of the notion of habitus, it is when repetition becomes routinization that creativity becomes possible. Rather than being pure invention or random behavior, improvisation in the arts (e.g. in jazz music) as well as in everyday life is founded on established and familiar patterns. This is evident in the ways in which adults and children improvise jokes and in the ways in which children engage in artful verbal play at all stages of development. At the same time, the ability to diverge from established patterns and be creative is itself subject to social control (cf. Csikszentmihalyi 1996). We can therefore say that communities vary in the ways in which they favor improvised verbal behavior in children as well as in adults. In addition, we find varying degrees of tolerance of improvisation depending on the types of activities (e.g. reciting a memorized religious prayer versus saying grace) and the types of participants (e.g. mother versus teacher).

The cases presented in this chapter and the general observations drawn from the literature suggest that we should think of socialization into verbal improvisation as the process whereby novices are allowed, expected, or even encouraged to engage in actions that are locally recognized as different from what they have previously experienced as witnesses or participants. These actions are in turn subject to evaluation for the degree to which they manage to (1) appear seamless, fluid, or effortless; (2) be effective (with respect to the goal of the activity); and (3) be appropriate from the point of view of the aesthetics and ethics of the activity as recognized in the community.

In other words, in addition to being oriented toward the accomplishment of something new or at least partly different from what was previously done by themselves or others, verbal improvisation is guided by practical, aesthetic, and moral canons that are specific to the cultural tradition that gives meaning to the ongoing activity.

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NOTES

- 1 Griffin and Mehan (1981) are an exception in their proposal that we should think of classroom interaction as spontaneous improvisation.
- 2 These data are drawn from a larger corpus of sound Super 8 films and audio recordings that are part of a project on children's activities supported in the Spring of 1981 by the (then) Research School of Pacific Studies at The Australian National University while Alessandro Duranti and Elinor Ochs were postdoctoral fellows at that university.
- 3 In the Samoan transcripts, we follow the traditional orthographic conventions originally introduced by British missionaries in the nineteenth century: the macron on vowels (e.g. ā, ē) indicates a long vowel, the inverted comma (') stands for a glottal stop, and the letter 'g' stands for a velar nasal, as in the 'ng' of the English word 'sing.' The latter convention was economical given that Samoan does not have the voiced palatal sound /g/ – and borrowings such as the English 'guitar' are pronounced /kitala/ – but it has had the disastrous effect that people who are not familiar with the language do interpret the 'g' as a /g/, and thus mispronounce it, for example reading Pago Pago, the name of the capital of American Samoa, as if it should be pronounced /pago pago/ instead of /paŋo paŋo/.
- 4 We thank Elinor Ochs for providing us with a fuller version of the original transcript used for the analysis given in Capps and Ochs (2002).

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